SENECA

ON THE SHORTNESS OF LIFE

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By

Seneca

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Chapter 1

Most people, Paulinus, complain that life is too short. To these bitter folk, life hurtles past like a runaway horse, so fast and furious that it is impossible to discover its meaning before it is too late.

I'm not just talking about plebeians or that entity referred to as 'the common man.' Despair over the brevity of our chaotic lives is common to us all, even the rich and the famous.

As Hippocrates puts it, "Life is short, art is long."

And don't forget Aristotle's railing against nature in his old age, when he declared life unfair because some animals have a lifespan five or even ten times the length of humans (forgetting that man, unlike beast, is destined for great achievements).

The problem, Paulinus, is not that we have a short life, but that we *waste time*.

Life is long and there is enough of it for satisfying personal accomplishments – if we use our hours well.

But when time is squandered in the pursuit of pleasure or in vain idleness, when it is spent with no real purpose, the finality of death fast approaches and it is only then, when we are forced to, that we at last take a good hard look at how we have spent our life – just as we become aware that it is ending.

Thus the time we are given is not brief, but we make it so. We do not lack time; on the contrary, there is so much of it that we waste an obscene amount

One more point. A great fortune can quickly diminish in the inept hands of an unworthy beneficiary but wealth, while scarce for most people, if managed carefully can grow, and life is greatly enhanced for the man who can manage his financial resources successfully over his lifetime.

Chapter 2

Why are people so bitter, Paulinus? Nature has been good to us, not cruel. A life well spent can truly be a long life.

But many men are governed by greed, or by a life devoted to dice and drinking. Too many men are paralyzed by laziness. One obsesses over career politics and lives his life based on the whims of others. Another, ruled by a love of making money, devotes all his energy to his business. Some are driven mad by rage and devoted to being violent or *macho*, perpetually hell-bent upon inflicting harm on others or being overly concerned with their own safety. Many people are virtually enslaved by a life of servitude working for the wealthy. Others are kept busy either chasing other people's money or in complaining about their own troubled finances.

Those who choose to have no real purpose in life are ever rootless and dissatisfied, tossed by their aimlessness into ever-changing situations. A man who opts to live a life with no principles to steer by usually gets a big surprise from Fate while he is sitting back yawning. As the man says, "The amount of life we truly live is small. For our existence on Earth is not Life, but merely Time."

Vices tempt us on all fronts, and self-indulgence impedes us from seeing the bigger picture. Lust for pleasure shields our eyes to the truth and keeps us down, overwhelming our senses and making us a prisoner to the pleasures of the flesh.

Casualties of vice rarely return to their former true selves. Even if they are lucky enough to break free from the shackles of addiction, like the waters of the ocean which continue to churn after a squall has passed, their lives remain in constant turmoil; with never any respite, never any true rest from desire.

Do you think that I am talking just about those who acknowledge their sins and short-comings?

Consider Rome's finest, those whose fortune and success turns everyone in their orbit into a groveling sycophant.

And yet to so many of them celebrity is a *burden.* The mere state of being moneyed seems to be an effort that drains them of all vitality, even the ability to speak properly. A lot of them are practically anemic from perpetual adulation, as if deprived of oxygen by the suffocating crowds of glad-handers clamoring to befriend them.

In short, consider all men from the lowest to the highest – the one who needs an advocate, the one who responds to the call, the one who is on trial, the one who defends him and the one who pronounces sentence. No one stands up for himself. Everyone just pays someone else to do it for them.

Inquire into the lives of successful men and you will find this common trait: A helps B and B helps C; no one is truly his own master. And some people have the most absurd attitude, moaning about mean bosses or indifferent colleagues who won't help them when they don't even bother trying to help themselves. How can anyone complain that no one will devote time to them when they allot no time for themselves?

Besides, no matter who you are, The Man does occasionally bend his ear to you even if his eyes are looking elsewhere; he does *occasionally* condescend to listen to your demands and let you sit at his side. But you never think to listen to your own voice, to bend your own ear inward to hear what it is that you yourself have to say.

Chapter 3

Even though the brightest thinkers of all time have pondered on this theme, none of them have been able to adequately explain the paradox of human nature. People don't let others steal their property, and they rush to vigorously defend themselves if there is even the slightest controversy over the demarcation of land boundaries, yet they allow others to *trespass on their very existence* – indeed they themselves even collude with those who will eventually possess it!

No one wants to give away money, but among how many does each one of us willingly give away his life?

In protecting their wealth men are tight-fisted, but when it comes to the matter of time, in the case of the one thing in which it is wise to be parsimonious, they are actually generous to a fault.

And so as an example I would like to single one out from the company of older men and say: I see that you have reached the end of your life, you are pushing hard on your hundredth year, or possibly are even older, come now, recall your life and make a reckoning.

Consider how much of your time was spent with money-lenders, how much with a mistress, how much with a superior, how much with a business client, how much in arguing with your wife, how much in berating underlings, how much in hurrying about town fulfilling pointless social obligations.

Add the illnesses which you brought about by your own rash behavior as yet more time that has been allowed to pass by unused. You will see that you have less years to your credit than you first counted.

Search your memory and see if you ever had future plans and how few days have passed as you had intended them to. Recall when you ever had time to yourself, when the look on your face was ever relaxed, when you didn't have anything on your mind, what professional accomplishments you have achieved in so long a life, how many have taken time from you when you were not even aware of giving it away, how much was frittered away on pointless worry, in ignorant bliss, in the pursuit of pleasure, in the seductions of society,

how little of yourself was left to you; you will see that you are dying before your time!"

What then is the reason for this?

You live as if you will live forever, no care for your mortality ever enters your head, you pay no mind to how much time has already gone by.

You waste time as if it was a limitless resource, when any moment you spend on someone else or some matter is potentially your last.

You possess a fear that is all too human but have the boundless desires of a god.

You will hear many men say: "When I'm fifty I'll slow down; when I'm sixty, I'll be ready for retirement."

But what guarantee, pray, do you have that your life will last longer?

Who can possibly ensure that your life plays out just as you plan it?

Are you not ashamed to save for yourself only the last part of your life, and to set aside for knowledge only that time which can't be spent on making money?

It is too late to begin living life just as it is ending! What stubborn denial of mortality to delay dreams to after your fiftieth and sixtieth year, and to plan on starting your life at a point that not everyone even gets to.

Chapter 4

You will hear some of the most powerful and senior people make off-hand comments about how they long to truly relax, claiming that they enjoy it, yearning for a life of leisure over all other pursuits.

They claim to want to step down and walk away from their exalted positions; and while not much ever changes in their world as a result, their good luck its very self is sure to come crashing down.

The god-like Augustus, a man whom Fortune blessed more than any other, never stopped praying for rest and release from public affairs; everything he spoke of always got back to this topic – his desire to lead a simple, peaceful life.

This was the happy, if perhaps vain, consolation with which Augustus would lighten his labors – that one day he would have time to *live for himself.*

In a letter addressed to the Senate, in which the Emperor had promised that the rest of his days would not lack the dignity of his former glory, I find this remarkable passage:

"However, these issues can be portrayed better by actions rather than promises. But because that happy time is still far off, my desire for that existence most earnestly prayed for has given me a chance to sample some of its delight through the pleasure of words."

So desirable a thing was a life of leisure that he gained pleasure in thought what he knew he could not attain in reality. He who felt responsible for everything, who decided the fate of nations, desired more than anything to be able to step down from such a position.

Increasingly, the Emperor felt the strain behind the flattery that sprang forth from every corner of his domains, sensing a subtle resentment fomenting beneath the blessings. Forced to wage war first against his countrymen, then against his colleagues, and lastly against his relatives, Augustus didn't shy from shedding blood on land and sea to preserve the realm.

Through Macedonia, Sicily, Egypt, Syria, and Asia, and almost all countries he followed the path of battle, and when his troops were tired of shedding Roman blood, he marched them to foreign wars.

While he was settling disputes in the Alpine regions, and subduing enemies rooted in the midst of a peaceful empire, while he was extending its borders even past the Rhine and the Euphrates and the Danube, in Rome itself the swords of Murena, Caepio, Lepidus, Egnatius, and others were being sharpened to slay him.

Augustus was never completely free of enemies. There was the time when his daughter and all the young aristocrats who were linked to her adultery like a sacred oath, and he was often surprised in his later years by schemers like Paulus, and a second time he had to fear a woman in cahoots with Antony.

When he had cut out these ulcers together with the limbs themselves, others would grow in their place; just as in a body that had a surfeit of blood, there was always a rupture somewhere.

But still he longed for rest, a recurring day-dream in which he found escape from his burdens. This was the prayer of a man who had been able to answer the prayers of his people.

Chapter 5

Marcus Cicero, long associated with men like Catiline and Clodius and Pompey and Crassus, some avowed enemies, others dubious friends, was tossed to and fro along with the state as he sought to keep it from destruction. He was at last swept away, unable as he was to be happy in success or patient during conflict. How many times must he have cursed that very consulship of his, which he had once praised so lavishly, though not without reason!

How pathetic the language he uses in a letter to Atticus, when Pompey the elder had been vanquished, and his son was still trying to restore his decimated troops in Spain:

"Do you wonder," he said, "what I am doing here? I am languishing in my Tuscan villa half a prisoner."

He then goes on to make other statements, in which he complains about his former life and moans about the present and despairs of the future.

Cicero said that he was "half a prisoner." But, truthfully, the wise man will never stoop to such a term, never will he be 'half a prisoner' – he who possesses an undiminished and stable liberty, being free and his own master, towers over all others. For what can possibly be above a man who has mastered his life and is thus above Fortune?

Chapter 6

On one occasion, Livius Drusus, a courageous and energetic man, had with the backing of a huge crowd gathered from all Italy, proposed new laws to combat the evil threat of the Gracchi. Seeing no future for his policy, which he could neither execute nor abandon once it had started, Drusus is reputed to have complained bitterly about the tumultuous life he had endured from the cradle, and to have declared that he was the only person who had never had a vacation - even as a boy.

Apparently, while Drusus was still a young man and dressed in the clothes of youth, he was already serving in the courts, with the precocious dexterity to persuade juries on behalf of those who were accused, and to make his influence felt with the magistrates.

How far was this drive destined to take him?

Anyone might have guessed that such intense ambition would result in great personal and public misfortune.

And so it was too late for Drusus to moan about never taking a day off when from the very beginning he had been shoving his achievements in everyone's face and generally being a nuisance about town.

There is some debate as to whether or not he took his own life, as he tumbled from a sudden wound in his groin, some doubting whether this fatal injury was voluntary, but no one, whether it was deserved.

It would be a waste of time to list more individuals who, though others perceived them to be the happiest of folk, have articulated their hatred for everything they ever did, and with their own lips have damned their own lives for having been wasted. But why complain? Such pointless railing changed neither themselves nor anyone else.

Besides, when these types finish venting, they typically fall back into their usual routine.

Heaven knows! Such an existence as yours, even if it lasted past a thousand years, would shrivel into the briefest flicker of a life.

The time you have, the experience of which is relative, although of course it feels like it is rushing away, by definition escapes from you quickly; because you don't grab it firmly enough, you neither hold back nor cause to delay the fastest moving thing in the world. You let it slip away as if it were something unimportant that could easily be replaced.

Chapter 7

To my mind, the worst people include those who have no time for anything other than drinking and lusting; there is no more shameful waste of one's time than this.

Others, even if they try pursuing a dream of greatness, inevitably go adrift in a terrible way, ultimately overwhelmed by greed or anger. Whether obsessed with perceived slights or waging unjust wars, these loafers squander their time on earth behaving in the way they think a man should. But those who are governed by the delights of the stomach and groin bear a stain of dishonor.

Consider the amount of time frittered away by these wastrels, see how much of their day they waste jabbering about things that will never come to pass. How scared they are to get up and *do something*. How much time they waste ingratiating themselves with higher-ups or networking or legal matters or throwing lavish dinners – for even these are par for the course now – and you will see how their concerns, whether you deem them good or bad, do not permit them much room to maneuver let alone breathe.

Finally, it is universally acknowledged that no single worthwhile goal can be successfully pursued by a man who is occupied with many tasks – lawyer, teacher, whomever - because the mind, when its focus is split, absorbs little in depth and rejects everything that is, so to speak, jammed into it.

The busy man is busy with everything except living; there is nothing that is more difficult to learn how to do right.

It takes all of our life to learn how to live, and – something that may surprise you more – it takes just as long to learn how to die.

Many very great men, having cast off all their burdens, having renounced wealth, commerce and carnal pleasures, have made it their one goal up to the very end of life to learn how to use their time properly. Sadly, the majority of them ended up departing this earth confessing that they still did not know the secret to living correctly. Thus, most other people know even less than these men.

Trust me, it takes an extraordinary person and one who has risen high above human frailties not to allow any of his time to be stolen from him, and it follows that the life of such a man is very long because he has given so much of his own time to himself.

None of it was wasted; none of it was handed over to others. Guarding his allotted days on this earth carefully, he knew that nothing was worth wasting time for. At least that man had time enough. But those who have been deprived of so much living by public duty, have necessarily had too little of it.

And there is no cause for you to think that these people are not sometimes aware of their loss.

Indeed, you will hear many of those who are saddled by great wealth and power exclaim at times in the company of their many cronies, or their statements in court, or their other high-class problems: "I have no life!"

Of course you have no life! All those people you thrive on take it from you!

How many days has that client had from you? Of how many that colleague? How many that old widow concerned with burying her husband?

Of how many the con-man who begged you?

Of how many that very powerful friend (who you think is your friend but is just using you for the friends that you have, people he would like to know and perhaps keep in his retinue)?

Count, I say, and review the days of your life; you will see that very few have been devoted to yourself.

Don't forget that famous do-gooder who begged the city for official responsibility. As soon as he got it, all he wanted was to step down. He would never stop whining, "When will this tenure be over!"

Having been given the responsibility of putting on the Games, and after assigning great significance on being awarded the role to all who knew him, he would then only say, "When will this chore be over?"

Today, he is praised all across town, and fills the forum with a throng that extends farther than words can travel, yet is often heard muttering, sotto voce, "When will my holiday come?"

We all rush through life torn between a desire for the future and a weariness of the present.

But he who devotes his time to his own needs, who plans out every day as if it were his last, neither longs for nor fears for tomorrow.

How many new pleasures can any hour bring? They are all known and all have been enjoyed to the max.

Fate will dole out the remainder of a man's time as she chooses. A man's past is forever set in stone.

There may be more given, but nothing taken away, and the man will accept anything extra like a man who is full but finds room for another morsel, despite not having any room in his stomach.

A grey-haired wrinkled man has not necessarily lived long. More accurately, he has existed long.

Imagine a sailor who has been caught by a ferocious storm just moments after setting sail being tossed hither and thither by a succession of winds blustering around him, being swirled in a whorl around the same course? He didn't sail anywhere. He was just sent thrashing about in circles by the sea.

Chapter 8

It always amazes me to see men demanding time from others and those from whom they ask it indulging them.

Both parties focus on the matter of the request for time, neither of them on the time itself; as if what is asked for were nothing, what is given, nothing.

Men are frivolous with the most valuable thing in the world, blind to its value because it is intangible, because it cannot be seen, and for this reason it is considered a very cheap thing – even of almost no value at all.

Men put a lot of worth in stocks and bonds, and for these they hire out their labor or service.

But no one places as much value on time; all spend it grandly as if it cost nothing.

Observe how these same people with nothing but time on their hands run in haste to the doctor if they get sick and the threat of death suddenly appears on the horizon. See how ready they are, when facing death, to sell all they own in order to keep living! Such is the paradox of human nature.

But if each man could see the number of years he has left ahead, just as he can see the years he has behind him, how disturbed those would be who saw only a few left, how careful they would be with them!

And yet it is easy to spend something that is a known quantity, no matter how small it may be; but this must be done sparingly before it is all gone.

Yet there is no reason for you to assume that such people are aware of how precious a thing time is, because many of them are prepared to surrender a portion of their own years to those whom they love.

And they do this without realizing it; but the result of their sacrifice is that they suffer a loss of time without adding to the years of those whom they hold dear.

But one thing they definitely do not know is that they are losing something. Dispensing of something that is lost without being noticed is an act they can live with.

But no one will bring back those years; no one can reboot your existence.

Life will keep marching on and never reverse course; it will be silent, it will not remind you of its swiftness.

Noiselessly it will pass; it will not be slowed by government decree, or by the roar of an entire population. With the same speed that it began, it will continue; never slowing or reversing. And what does this tell us? You have been occupied while life hurtled past you. Meanwhile the grim reaper is knocking on your door, and, like it or not, you must let him in.

Chapter 9

Is there anything more ridiculous than a person talking with certitude about the future? Such people devote their energy on creating a better life for themselves – spending their life preparing for life!

They are motivated by thoughts of a distant tomorrow; but postponing life is the greatest waste of time; it deprives them of each new day life brings, it steals from the present with the promise of the hereafter.

The greatest obstacle to living a full life is having expectations, delaying gratification based on what might happen tomorrow which squanders today.

Where do you focus? At what point do you aim?

Everything that is to come is steeped in uncertainty; live now!

Behold how the greatest of poets laments, and, as if inspired by the voice of the gods, sings the oh-so poignant strain:

The sunniest day in a miserable mortal's life
Is always the first to fly.

"Why do you wait," asks he. "Why are you idle? If you don't seize the day, it escapes."

Even though you seize it, it still will flee; therefore you must compete with time's haste in the speed of using it, and, like a gush of water that blasts past and will not always flow calmly, you must drink fast.

Pointedly, the specific word of the bard is most aptly chosen to cast disapproval on infinite delay, in that he says, not "the sunniest age," but "the sunniest day."

Dictated by greed, the ignorant stretch before themselves months and years in long array, not bothered about anything and living a lazy life despite knowing that time flies so fast.

The bard sings to you about seizing the day, that today is flying.

Is there, then, any doubt that for poor mortals who are too preoccupied, the sunniest day is always the first to flee?

Old age surprises them while their minds are still immature, and they come to it unready and defenseless, because they have not prepared for it; they have stumbled upon it suddenly and unexpectedly. They did not notice that it was drawing nearer day by day.

Even as chatting or reading or musing on some subject distracts the traveler, and he finds that he has reached the end of his journey before realizing that it was even coming up, so it is with this unceasing and ever speedy journey of life, which we progress through at the same pace whether awake or asleep.

Those who are too busy to notice life as it passes by them come to this realization only at the end.

Chapter 10

If I were to parse the argument that I have proposed, many things would occur to me which I could use to prove that the busy life is indeed a brief one.

Fabianus, who was not one of today's sophists, but a natural philosopher in the ancient mold, used to say that we must fight our passions like soldiers, not with half-measures, and that the battle must be hard fought, not by inflicting minor wounds; and that sophistry is useless, for the passions must be not curbed but crushed. However, reproach for being governed by passions is a mistake; these people must be instructed not criticized.

Life is divided into three parts: what was, what is and what shall be. Of these three periods, the present is short, the future is doubtful and the past alone is certain.

Only over the last one has fate lost control; only the past cannot be determined by any man.

The busy lose perspective because they are too distracted to stop and look back at the past, and if they did, there is no joy in recalling something that they must regard with regret.

They are thus incapable of examining a life misspent, of realizing how much time was wasted on vices, no matter how obvious it is that they have squandered their days. Making it even harder, they are presently indulging in those same pleasurable pursuits and do not have the will to change course.

No one truly turns to examine his past, unless he is prepared to submit his acts to the courtroom of his conscience, which can never be fooled. He who has ambitiously coveted, proudly scorned, recklessly vanquished, treacherously betrayed, greedily taken, or extravagantly squandered, must forever doubt the veracity of his memory.

And yet this is the allotment of our time that is sacred and set apart, placed beyond the reach of human folly, and taken from the control of fate, the part of life which is allayed by no desire, by no

fear, by no attack of illness; this can neither be disturbed nor taken away and is made more profound by its perpetual possession.

The present offers one day at a time, divided into minutes; but all the days of the past can be conjured up when called, and are under your control to behold and hold them at will – a trick that the busy have no time to perform.

A clear conscience gives the tranquil mind power to explore all the parts of its existence; but the mind that is preoccupied, as if burdened by a yoke, cannot turn and look back.

Such lives vanish into the abyss and can never be dredged up from the bottomless depths. It is the same with time. It makes no difference how much of it you have, if there is no foundation, time will seep out through the chinks and holes of the mind.

Present time is very brief, so much so that to some there seems to be none of it – it is always in motion, flowing and hurrying on; it ends before it has arrived, and can no more suffer delay than the sky or the stars, whose ever restless motion never lets them linger in place.

The busy man remains rooted to the ground, ever stuck in the present, a time so brief that it cannot be grasped, and thus it is stolen from him, busy as he is with so many things.

Chapter 11

In a word, do you want to know why they truly do not live long?

Behold how keen man is to live a so-called long life!

Frail old codgers beg the gods for a few more years. They lie to themselves that they are younger than they are, finding solace in self-deception, as if they had succeeded in tricking fate herself.

But when a mortal illness strikes, they are slowly pulled by death, dragged gradually from existence.

They cry out that they have been fools, because they never really lived, and vow to live a true life if spared from their disease. Too late they realize what time they wasted pursuing worthless things, and how so much hard work seeking happiness from materialism was in vain.

But what about those whose life is spent far from the world of commerce, why should it not be enough?

None of it is assigned to another, none of it is scattered about, none is set aside for Fortune, none of it dies from neglect, nothing is taken back by wasteful giving.

There is no surplus. The amount is fixed like the soul. Though small, the amount is sufficient, and thus when his last day comes, the man who knows this will greet death appropriately.

Chapter 12

Perhaps you are wondering who exactly I mean by the 'busy'? There is no reason to assume I mean only those whom the dogs have dragged down to their level, those crowded by admirers or haters who are always envious of others, those who are torn between domesticity and commerce, or those whom the judge's gavel keeps occupied in gaining notoriety that will slowly eat away at them.

Even the leisured man is busy; in his mansion or on his couch, alone, withdrawn from the world where the only source of worry is himself. Truly, such people are not living in leisure but are busy being idle.

Would you call a man obsessing over the purity of his gold at leisure? Who sits in a public arena watching a fight? Who divides his mules into pairs determined by age and color? Who decides which athletes eats last?

What would you say of those men who waste time getting their hair cut once week, debating how each lock should appear, while every stray strand is drawn from one side to the other over his forehead?

How angry they get if the barber makes a mistake, as if he were shearing a man! How they become enflamed if any of their mane is cropped unevenly, if the right ringlets do not fall into place just so!

Which of these fops would care more if his country was in disarray than his hair? Who is not more worried about having his head look good rather than it be safe?

Who would not prefer to be well-groomed rather than well-mannered? Would you call such an image-obsessed person at leisure?

And what about those who are busy in composing, hearing and reciting songs, modulating the voice nature gave them to suit the current music trend, busy snapping their fingers to the beat, or humming a solemn tune which is supposed to sound sad?

They have no leisure. They too are busy doing nothing.

And the parties they throw, ye gods! How carefully they place the silver, how splendidly attired are their handsome slave-boys, how

they gorge on fatty wild boar and rich game birds, at what speed do their slick attractive servants tend to people's needs, how deftly are the plump offerings carved into delectable slices, how discreetly do the liveried boys wipe the drool from the mouths of the inebriated.

This is how they live the good life, but their evil side is ever present and they can neither eat nor drink without such conspicuous consumption.

These types are not so much the leisured class as the 'littered class' – hand-carried from one inconsequential meeting to the next in a cushioned chair and litter, and always perfectly punctual for their pampered voyage about town - as if it were against the law to miss an appointment. They must be reminded when to bathe, when to swim, when to dine; so cushy are their lives that their diseased minds are incapable of prompting them to eat!

I hear that a certain member of this 'littered' class when raised by hand from his bath-tub and settled into his throne asked: "Am I sitting down now?"

Do you think this same fellow knows whether he is alive or dead? It's hard to say if I pity him more if he was fully aware of his existence, or if he was just faking it.

They truly forget so much, but they also feign obliviousness too. Expensive vices fuel their blissful ignorance. Such a life of luxurious despair is beneath human dignity. All these people do is provide material for mimes to mock them with.

Truly, they take more than they give, and indulge in such an incredible multitude of vices these days, in this aspect alone are they truly talented, that at this point we can say that even the most accurate and uproarious mimes are not really doing their antics justice.

Incredible. A man so lost in luxury that he must trust another man's word to verify whether he is sitting down!

Such a man is thus not at leisure and a different term is required. Like a patient who has passed on, he has ceased to live, but is unaware that he is dead. A man who is half-alive, who needs someone to tell him the current posture of his own body, how can he be the master of his time?

Chapter 13

It would be tedious to discuss all those sad souls who spend their lives playing chess or sports or lying sprawled on their backs worshipping Sol. They are not free, but trapped by their love of fleeting pleasures. For example, without a doubt there are many triflers who waste time on pointless literary conundrums, of whom even among the Romans there is now an ever growing number.

It used to be that just the Greeks frittered away afternoons discussing how many oarsmen Ulysses had, whether *The Iliad* or *The Odyssey* was composed first, whether they were written by the same person, and various other literary debates of this ilk, issues which do nothing for the soul if considered alone and might even make you look foolish if you published them.

Behold how this obsession with ephemera now flourishes in Rome. I hear people babbling about the first Roman general to do such and such, how Duilius was the first to win a victory at sea, Dentatus the first to use elephants in a triumph, et cetera. Even if it is obvious that some piece of information has no value, most of the popular trivia is usually related to matters of interest to Romans, and thus wins our attention by its apparent relevancy to our lives, despite its superficiality.

We may excuse those who first started this naval gazing and got the Romans to jump on ship.

It was Claudius and for this reason he was surnamed Caudex, in reference to the ancient structure formed by joining boards together (which also explains why the Tables are called *codices*, and freight-boats in the ancient style that pass up and down the Tiber are known as *codicariae*).

Of related interest is the fact that Valerius Corvinus was the first to conquer Messana, thereby becoming the first member of his family to bear the surname Messana, having named himself after the city he had taken, a practice later wryly referred to as *messana permutante*. I might also add that Lucius Sulla was the first to let captured lions

loose in the Circus, whereas before they were only shown in chains, and that javelin-throwers were dispatched by King Bocchus to slaughter them.

What is the point of knowing, for example, that Pompey was the first to stage a fight between elephants and lowly men in the Circus in a mockery of real battle?

A head of state tarnishes the reputation of good Romans with such vulgar spectacle. Do condemned men not already fight to the death? Is that not enough? Must they now be crushed alive by monsters?

It would be better that such events pass into oblivion rather than risk another rich man learning of the inhuman spectacle and becoming jealous. O, how blinded man is made by money.

While Pompey was busy commanding troops comprised of wretched humans and wild animals born under a different sky, when he was actually declaring war with such ill-matched forces, there was slaughter in the streets of Rome as man and beast fought one another, spilling more blood than in any of their battles.

But to return to the main point, and to illustrate further how people are futilely concerned with such matters - that Metellus, in his triumph following his victory over the Carthaginians in Sicily, was the first Roman to lead his procession with 120 elephants, that Sulla was the last of the Romans to extend the city's boundaries, when such expansion historically was done only to Italy's borders, not a province's. Is it more profitable to know this or that Mount Aventine needs to be officially outside of the pomerium for one of two reasons, either because there are too many plebeians there or because the auspices were not favorable when the priests of Remus sacrificed birds there? There are countless other reports like this one, all riddled with falsehoods.

You may give such narratives the benefit of the doubt and have faith in the truth of what some people say and write, but how will the dissemination of such stories prevent future mistakes? Whose passions will they nip in the bud? Will they help the brave be more just? Fabianus doubted whether it was better to immerse one's self in study rather than get caught up in all this useless knowledge.

Chapter 14

The only really leisured people are those who devote time to acquiring true knowledge rather than trivia. Such people are not content to live 'in the moment' exclusively but show a keen awareness of history, of all the years that have gone before them and they know that the amount of time they have left is uncertain and finite.

Unless we are complete ingrates, the lives of all those men that preceded us should be seen as sacred. Their collective existence paved the way for our own time on Earth.

Because of the efforts of our ancestors we have moved further from darkness into light. We are free to spend time in any era, to roam beyond the narrow confines of the mind, beyond the limits of human capability to explore the vast ocean of time stretched before us.

We may dispute with Socrates, question Carneades, find equanimity with Epicurus, transcend human nature with the Stoics and indulge it with the Cynics. When life permits us to commune with every era, why not turn the tables on this absurdly short and fleeting span of time we are endowed with by spending some of it in the past, which is boundless and inhabited by men better than ourselves?

Those nobs who rush about honoring social obligations, who never give themselves or anyone else a break, when they have fully indulged their insanity, when they have met with every contact they have, and have left no acquaintance unseen, when they have rapped on every neighbor's door – in a city as large and varied of ours, how many people will they have really seen and made a connection with?

How many so-called friends will slam the door in their face because they are tired or hung-over? How many will, after having kept them waiting for an excruciatingly long time, zip by pretending to be too busy to talk? How many will avoid a place crowded with acquaintances and slip out through a side door as if it were not ruder to deceive than to avoid?

How many, still half-asleep, will barely move their mouths to utter a visitor's name and can only muster at best a discourteous yawn?

It is fair to say that those who make Zeno, Pythagoras, Democritus and other giants of philosophy their daily companions will be more fully engaged in a rewarding life. None of these friends will be too busy to welcome you inside their home, none will fail to leave his caller feeling refreshed after an appointment. Any man can spend time with them day or night.

Chapter 15

None of these men will bring about your death any time sooner, but rather they will teach you *how* to die. None of them will shorten your lifespan, but each will add the wisdom of his years to yours. In other words, there is nothing dangerous about talking to these people and it won't cost you a penny.

Take from them as much as you wish. It's up to you to squeeze the most you can from their wisdom. What bliss, what a glorious old age awaits the man who has offered himself as a mate to these intellects! He will have mentors and colleagues from whom he may seek advice on the smallest of matters, companions ever ready with counsel for his daily life, from whom he may hear truth without judgment, praise without flattery, and after whose likeness he may fashion himself. They say 'you can't choose your parents,' that they have been given to us by chance; but the good news is we can choose to be the sons of whomever we desire. There are many respectable fathers scattered across the centuries to choose from. Select a genius and make yourself their intellectual heir. You could even inherit their name and make claim to be a true descendant, go forth and share this wealth of knowledge with others.

These men will show you the way to immortality, and take you to heights from which no man can be cast down. This is the only way to extend mortality – truly, by transforming time into immortality. Honors, statues and all other mighty monuments to man's ambition carved in stone will crumble but the wisdom of the past is indestructible. Age cannot wither nor destroy the knowledge which serves all generations.

The vitality of Philosophy is strengthened by each new generation's contribution to it. The Philosopher alone is unfettered by the confines of humanity but lives forever, like a god. He embraces memory, utilizes the present and anticipates with relish what is to come. He makes his time on Earth longer by merging past, present and future into one.

Chapter 16

A so-called busy man may declare the day to be endless, or may mourn how the hours crawl slowly toward dinner time, but this is no evidence that this man's life is long. For when the busy man finally has some time to himself he's left to stew in boundless boredom with nothing to do and with no clue how to fill his day.

Restlessly these types seek new ways to be at leisure and the time between play needles them to no end. Their excitement peaks at the announcement of a gladiator bout or some other such spectacle and they long to skip the days that lie between now and the grand day of extravagant entertainment. Their impatient waiting for something they desire gives them the illusion that time is passing by slowly. Yet their days on Earth remain finite, even as they fritter away time bobbing from one pleasure to another.

For these wasters, uneventful afternoons of no play are long and hateful. Yet a single night out drinking with a harlot seems to fly by in no time!

This strange perception of the passage of time depending on one's mood and company has provided material for the poets. We have heard tales of how when Jupiter was with a lover the night he spent in her pleasant company seemed to pass twice as long. But doesn't using the story concerning a god as an example of how to make time pass longer merely encourage more human vice? Can a night that costs a man so much really be regretted by that same man for being so short? They waste the day in anticipation of the night, then spend the night worrying about the coming dawn.

Chapter 17

Ironically, the pleasures of these men are usually plagued by distractions and concerns as to how long the pleasurable feeling will last. Kings have cried at the thought of their rule coming to an end and rather than be made happy by the immensity of their power, all they do is fear the time when it will dwindle.

Apparently, when the arrogant King of Persia beheld the vastness of his troops spread out across boundless plains, he shed copious tears when he realized that not one man amongst his prodigious army would be alive in a hundred years' time.

He wept for their fate, whether it be death at sea or on land, in some such battle or even a skirmish, whatever each man's end might be, he cried because he saw that all of them would perish in time. The mere act of contemplating human mortality made this indomitable man, with his impressive defenses, tremble.

Why is such happiness tinged with fear? Because the superficial joy of men is not based on something real, but on something as troubled and fleeting as the life they were born into. How would you characterize those seemingly happy times that men describe as wretched? Even the triumphs of the lucky few are never without some trepidation.

The greatest blessings are a source of fear, and fate is no less fickle when things are going well. A man is never satisfied. The more money he has, the more he thinks he needs. Prayers are heard yet more prayers are always needed. Enough is never enough.

Everything we have is by chance and the higher up in life you go, the greater the fall is that awaits you.

A pleasure that is ephemeral brings no true satisfaction to any man. How miserable must be the lives of those folk who labor so hard for something that once gained they must work even harder to keep.

They toil night and day to get what they want, and worry a great deal about what they have. Meantime, no one realizes how many days have slipped by, never to return.

Something new always comes along to keep the occupied busy. Hope begets more hope, ambition more ambition. Instead of finding a new purpose, the busy just change the nature of whatever it is that preoccupies them. Admittedly, social obligations can be tiring. Society is a drain. As soon as we have some success, we seek more. A prosecutor with problems turns his eyes to becoming a judge, a bigger, new position that comes with newer, bigger problems. Once he is done with being a judge, he seeks the office of President of the Court. His whole life revolves around maintaining his wealth and prestige.

Did the barracks set Marius free? As consul he is always occupied. Is Quintius in a hurry to finish his dictatorship? He will never be free, and will always be called upon even when in retirement. Scipio took on the Carthaginians before he was ready for such a challenge – and the result was victory over Hannibal, success at Antiochus, a consulship guaranteed for him and his brother. Suddenly he is sitting beside Jove. As a young man, he thought little of achievements worthy of the gods and, when he is old, it will be a bitter exile from a world that will have long since ceased to satisfy his expectations. Happy or unhappy, people will always worry. Toil never ebbs; we pray for leisure but true leisure never comes.

Chapter 18

Life is exhausting, dear Paulinus. Steer away from the tempest of busy time and find a tranquil harbor to cruise into. Think of all the big waves you have met both in public and private; how you have known the bitter-sweet taste of power and the dissatisfaction of labor. Remind yourself that enough is never enough; that being in a state of leisure is often an illusion. Most of your life is given to society, but save some time for yourself.

I'm not proposing you lead an indolent existence and trade the joys of social intercourse for sleep. A life that is not busy isn't necessarily idle. On the contrary, you will be able to do more satisfying work and be happily engaged with your day - even in retirement.

You should know I consider the history of the world without bias toward state nor religion. A man is not loved if he never takes a side but I believe it is more important to know yourself than, say, the corn business.

Remember you are endowed with a powerful mind, designed to comprehend the most challenging subjects. Recall also all the studying from your earliest years - enough learning that you might be entrusted with managing a thousand corn-cobs; while you dreamt of something greater. The world of commerce is not that sophisticated, and there are lesser men perhaps better suited to such jobs. Oxen are more appropriate for the hauling of heavy loads than thoroughbred horses. Who puts a cart behind a race-horse?

Remember, this is no easy task we are talking about here. People who are hungry, for example, do not listen to reason and have little patience for the law.

I wager that within a few days of his death, Gaius Caesar's ghost was racked with guilt because the Roman people had barely enough food and provisions for a week, a paltry inheritance from a leader who spent his rule building bridges out of boats and squandering the Empire's resources. Caesar's grandiose reign was paid for by the Romans who he left to scratch for morsels in desperate starvation. Our dearly

departed leader's efforts to play the mad foreign King almost caused a famine, and what surely would have been the destruction of Rome, following the entire populace's destruction.

How would the owners of the corn market feel if they had to face rocks, swords, fire and a Caligula? With cunning but necessary subterfuge they hid the grim inheritance Caesar had left the state. Often it is better to hide an illness from the patient, because just the mere awareness of a disease can bring about death.

Chapter 19

This is how you retire to a quieter, safer, greater place! Do you think it is the same thing to be concerned with the import of corn, whether it has been mishandled by the incompetence of those who transport it, in ensuring that it doesn't get too warm or damp, or whether your time is better spent in the more noble and divine study of yourself, the nature of God and what you might expect in the future?

Nature permits us respite only when we are free from the desires of the flesh. It is a truth that sustains us and is a serious principle at the heart of all existence. It lifts our life beyond the confines of earthly concerns and exalts our natures to the stars. Is this not a miracle?

One has to leave the ground in order to see the whole world. Now, while we are fired up, is the time to vigorously adopt this broader perspective.

People studying the liberal arts or whose lives are devoted to their careers, are never free to see life for what the truly long, blissful blessing that it is.

I have great hope in you, Paulinus.

Chapter 20

The default mood of the busy man is misery. He lives a wretched existence. He walks with strangers in a world somewhere between love and hate. If only they were willing to learn more about life rather than be content to remain imprisoned by its supposed cruel brevity.

So next time you see a man enjoying success, a minor celebrity, say, don't feel jealous of him; he has paid for his position with a large chunk of his time. He will have expended a lot of his days to have his name known for maybe a year or so.

The rich and famous are fond of saying how lonely it was in the beginning, when no one helped them, and how they had to suffer a thousand indignities to make it to the top.

One wonders if, in their old age, they will regret how much time they devoted to worrying about the inscription on their tomb. But by then it will be too late as along comes another generation with its own wicked, shameless ambitions.

It's embarrassing to see an attorney who should have retired years ago pause for breath in the middle of a summation, or any man for that matter who is tired more by the sheer act of living rather than the demands of his occupation.

There is one specific example that comes to mind which I have to mention. Turannius was an old man who, after he turned ninety, was released from his official duties by an act of Caesar. He had the idea to be laid out on his bed, surrounded by family, and to receive visitors as if he was dead. The entire household mourned the passing of its master and the sorrow was only lifted when the crazy loon returned to his normal routine of idle 'busy-ness.' Hard to believe that a man could become so bored as to get a thrill out of being dead for a few days.

Many men come to this place: the love of their profession lasts longer than their ability. They fight a losing battle with the body and tell themselves that age is just a state of mind. A soldier can't be drafted after 52 and a man can't run for Senate after he turns 60. It is

more difficult for men to give themselves a break than it is for the law to set them free.

Meantime, the busy steal and are stolen from; they interrupt and annoy each other, making each other's lives miserable and getting nothing from all this hullabaloo, no profit nor pleasure, and no benefit to the improvement of one's mind.

Everyone is in denial about death and we all have high hopes for our time on Earth. Some men even prepare for whatever lies after death – a necropolis of tombs, countless public dedications, blazing funeral pyres that can be seen from the stars and ostentatious funerals worthy of demi-gods. But in the end, their funerals were just like their lives – over in a short burst of flames.

THE END

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